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THE INTIMACY OF THE CROSS:  
KENOTIC LOVE IN HANS URS VON BALTHASAR AND SUFJAN STEVENS

Kellen Troxell

*Abstract: This essay discusses how Balthasar describes the relationship between the Father and the Son and how this has implications for the relationship between Christ and the Church. In addition, I use "To Be Alone With You" by Suffjan Stevens in order to further examine the implications of this relationship.*

I'd swim across Lake Michigan,  
I'd sell my shoes  
I'd give my body to be back again  
In the rest of the room  
To be alone with you  
To be alone with you  
To be alone with you  
You gave your body to the lonely  
They took your clothes  
You gave up a wife and a family  
You gave your ghost  
To be alone with me  
To be alone with me  
To be alone with me  
You went up on a tree  
To be alone with me

You went up on the tree  
I've never known the man who loved me<sup>1</sup>

Surrender is a tricky topic. It can be thought of as a weakness or invitation for abuse, but on the other hand it is a necessary component of intimacy and the greatest love. Who and what you surrender to makes all the difference. In theology, surrender is often termed *kenosis*. *Kenosis* is a common theme attributed to the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. It is a thread that can be found in nearly everything that Balthasar says, particularly when he talks about Christ. In this essay, I will discuss how Balthasar describes the relationship between the Father and the Son and how this has implications for the relationship between Christ and the Church. In addition, I will analyze “To Be Alone With You” by Sufjan Stevens in order to further examine the implications of this relationship.

In his discussion of Christ, Balthasar is concerned with his “mission” on earth. Christ’s mission on earth is to do the will of the Father, and it is his duty as Son to fulfill this mission. In *A Theology of History*, Balthasar states that “the Son’s form of existence...is the uninterrupted reception of everything that he is, of his very self, from the Father.”<sup>2</sup> Christ’s very being is not to act for himself and his own will apart from the Father’s, but to receive everything from the Father. The Son’s whole existence is continual openness to the will of the Father. The Son is God and thus cannot be anything other than who he is. Balthasar uses a metaphor for tuning stringed instruments (*Stimmen*) to talk about Christ’s mission and existence always being “in tune” with one another.<sup>3</sup> They are “in tune” with one another because they are the same. In Christ, who is the God-Man, humanity and divinity are brought together in one person. Balthasar sees this as crucial to Christ’s mission. In *Glory of the Lord*, he says that “God claims

for his service Christ's whole human existence, along with both its ideality and its reality. The mandated task is divine, its execution human, and the proportion of perfect 'attunement' between them is both human and divine."<sup>4</sup> Christ is both human and divine and thus his task of obedience and surrender to the Father comes from God and is divine, but since Christ is human when he does it, it is human. It is because this obedience is by a human that it can be redemptive for all beyond the normal bounds of one single person. Christ can be so "in tune" with his mission and being because he is both human and divine and merges these realities in his very personhood. Christ is the one who can bring this task to fulfillment precisely because he is both.

In *Love Alone is Credible*, Balthasar introduces the idea of kenosis not only as surrender, but says that "this obedience is essentially love."<sup>5</sup> This idea of love introduces a whole new dimension to this kenosis, that love is fundamentally about surrender. He defines love as "unconditional assent to and readiness for God's will...to whatever may come."<sup>6</sup> For Christ, this whatever meant that he surrendered even to the point of death. It is important to recognize the role of love in this kenotic surrender. A surrender to anything else could not be as good and pure as a surrender to God. Christ's kenotic surrender on the Cross is what reveals God's love for the world. It is "precisely in-and *only* in-the kenosis of Christ, the *inner* mystery of God's love comes to light."<sup>7</sup> For God's love to be revealed, the Son had to completely empty himself on the Cross for everyone. All of this is because of God's love for humanity. The only good surrender is that of love, otherwise it cannot be good.

One way the relationship between Christ and the Church may be discerned in Balthasar's work is through his use of similar wording and phrases when discussing Christ and the Church. The close relationship between the Church and Christ is evident in

Balthasar's work, because he talks about them in the same way. The things he says about how the Son relates to the Father are repeated when he is talking about the Church.

Christ is the form, the example, for all of us, the Church, to follow. The Church is supposed to follow Christ's example of surrender to the will of the Father. This is difficult because of our sinful nature as human beings. Nonetheless, the goal is to surrender to the will of the Father. To show that this seemingly impossible surrender is possible, Balthasar uses Mary as an example the Church can follow. Mary is an image of the Church. Her surrender is the ultimate example of a perfect surrender to God. She is only human, not the God-Man like Jesus, and yet through the grace of God, she surrenders to the Father's will with her *fiat*. It is important to note that Mary's surrender is not meant to replace Christ's surrender. Her surrender follows the form that Christ gives in his own surrender for everyone.

In *A Theology of History*, Balthasar talks about some qualities that this type of surrender to God has. One misconception about Mary's surrender is that it was passive, and that once she said yes, there was nothing more for her to do. When we start to look more carefully at her surrender, it is not a passive submission that is destroying the will of the person surrendering. Looking at Mary's life, nothing of it could have been anticipated before it happened. All of it was a gift from God, and all she had to do was surrender.<sup>8</sup> Her surrender is not passive. "On the contrary, it calls for the active participation of man's united powers, a wholehearted effort to banish anything that could spoil the purity of first receiving the divine message and substance, and then living it."<sup>9</sup> It is important for Balthasar that Mary did not just sit around and wait for God to do things, because this is not the nature of a true surrender to God. For Balthasar, "the more a man surrenders to God, the less he anticipates for himself, the more, in fact he lives *in time*."<sup>10</sup>

This is reminiscent of what Balthasar says about Jesus earlier in *A Theology of History*, where he talks about the fact that Jesus does not foresee what is coming to him, because that would mean that he was not fully human and it would not be a total surrender and trust in the Father.<sup>11</sup> It is an important element of the Christian life to not try and anticipate what God's will is, because then that would mean the person is trying to make themselves into God, because only God can know what the future holds. According to Balthasar, it is most authentically Christian to live in each moment and take it as it comes, as a gift from God. This is what he sees Mary doing as she accepts God's will to bear His son. In the same way, members of the Church are to accept what God is doing in their life as it comes, and not try to predict what the outcome might be. This requires an active putting aside of what the person's own will might be and trying to see what God is doing, and constantly refocusing to the present moment.

Mary is a figure for the Church as well as a part of it. Mary's surrender to God is perfect and complete, and "as members [of the Church], we participate in the humility of the handmaid, in her perfect obedience to the Lord, to the extent that we are obedient as parts to her whole."<sup>12</sup> The Church is meant to follow in the steps of Mary in her surrender and obedience to God. To surrender to the will of God is a choice for something, for the good and this is important. Christians, by virtue of their Baptism, are called to this surrender to the will of God. True fulfillment can only be found through this active and complete obedience.

The Saints are also good examples of this surrender, but Mary's is the most perfect. In the example of the Saints, one can see that each person has their own unique mission they are called to. Christ's mission was to be obedient to the Father and thus redeem humanity. Each Saint is an example of what it means to be continuously open to God's will and to live that out in each moment

of each day.

To be able to know God's will, one must know Christ and be close to Him. The most important way for Christians to grow close to Christ is through the Sacraments. For Balthasar, every sacrament is important, but the Eucharist is the most important. It is "in its remembering, celebrating, and obeying, the Church recalls and presents to itself the Lord Christ made present in her midst."<sup>13</sup> In the event of the Eucharist, the Church is recalling Christ's death, which is also the event of her own birth. The Eucharist is the event from which the Church comes into being as well as an event in which the Church obeys Christ. In the Eucharist, Christ is made present. It is not just a metaphorical remembrance, but instead an eternal reality experienced in time because the event of the Cross is both eternal and temporal.

The Church is related to Christ because she is his Bride as well as his Body. The Eucharist is where the Church surrenders to her Bridegroom and they are joined as one. This surrender is a complete openness to the other. In opening herself to Christ, the Church opens herself to God's grace and his will. The Church is able to surrender to Christ because in the sacrifice of the Mass, "the Church is granted a true, bodily contemporaneity with her Head in his sacrifice."<sup>14</sup> The Bride is taken up into the sacrifice by her Bridegroom, and Balthasar claims that it is there that something happens for both Christ and the Church, similar to when he met people in his resurrected form.<sup>15</sup> He also talks about it in Glory of the Lord. Balthasar talks about two actions happening in the Eucharist: The descent of God to flesh and the ascent of flesh to spirit.<sup>16</sup> The Eucharist is not just a symbolic event, but a sacramental event in which the Bridegroom and Bride meet face to face. From both Heaven and Earth, something takes place in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

This meeting is also what gives the Church her existence.

Balthasar says that “the memory of the event of Jesus’ self-surrender is a remembering that recalls the birth of the Church.”<sup>17</sup> This sacrifice of His life is what allows the Church to be. The Church is born in the sacrifice of the Cross, in the surrender of the Cross. Only by Christ’s obedience on the Cross does the Church come to be. The Church “cannot claim for herself an autonomous form” because “she is created purely from the being of Christ himself.”<sup>18</sup> This means that the Church was formed from Christ, similarly to how Eve was formed from Adam’s rib. Even more so than Adam and Eve, because Eve becomes her own person, but the Church “proceeds from Christ’s innermost personal reality, at once ‘Body’ and ‘Bride’.”<sup>19</sup> The Church receives her very being from Christ. All of this is important because only in light of Christ does the Church make sense. If Christ is not the center, the goal, the aim of the Church, if he is not visible in the actions and being of the Church, then she ceases to be the Church, she ceases to be anything. This can apply to the world, because we often times try to form the Church to something of this world. We want to make her look like some rational structure and are confused when she doesn’t conform to anything we know. She doesn’t conform because one has to look at Christ for her to make sense, but especially in our modern era, this is increasingly rare, and thus she makes little sense to us and we don’t understand why she doesn’t fit our stereotypes. It is important to Balthasar that the Church keeps Christ at her center, because he is the form for her to follow. If she fails to keep Christ central, she will not be who she is anymore and she is less open to the will of God. If she is not surrendering herself to God, who is all goodness, then she will fail in her mission, which is to keep Christ alive in the world and reveal God to the world. Only by continuously drawing close to Christ through the Sacraments can this be achieved.

In this world, sometimes it is difficult to discern what



is good and right. Balthasar begins to develop what he calls a theological aesthetics in *Glory of the Lord*. Theological aesthetics uses beauty as an entrance point to talking about God. For Balthasar, beautiful things reflect God's goodness and what can be said of beauty in general can be used analogously to talk about God. It is important to talk about this kenosis, but it is even better to be able to experience it. Art can help us do this. To help understand Christ's kenosis and what it means to surrender and to love someone, we can discuss a beautiful song by Sufjan Stevens. "To Be Alone With You" is a slow, gentle song on the album *Seven Swans*. The song is most noticeably about longing to being alone with someone. It is very soothing and calm. It also creates feelings of vulnerability and intimacy that come when someone is in love. When you are in love, you naturally want to be alone with that person. These feelings are created in the song from the simplicity of the acoustic guitar instrumentation as well as the way Sufjan sings. His voice is raspy and there is some harmony that comes in here and there, which adds to the beauty and tension of it.

The lyrics start off by talking about various things that the speaker would do or give up in order to be back with the person they are singing to, their lover. These things are not really practical or possible, like swimming across Lake Michigan or giving up their body, but they are things that someone in love would want to do, especially if they knew they couldn't actually be with the person at that point in time. The first verse ends by talking about being back in "the rest of the room," as if they have been with the lover at some earlier point in time and want to go back. They have experienced the peacefulness that comes with being with a lover. Being with the lover was a restful, peaceful time. Then the chorus starts that says "to be alone with you". The singer would do all of the things listed in the first verse to be alone with the lover, to whom the song is addressed.

Then the second verse starts. In this verse, the things listed are no longer hypothetical, but instead are a recalling of past events. These past events are all about how the lover gave everything. The lover gave their body up. The only thing that was not given was taken: the clothes. The lover gave up having a family and gave their ghost, all “to be alone with me”, the singer. The lover has already surrendered everything for the singer and they would give anything to repay them, or to even just see the lover again. The last line of the second verse talks about going up on a tree, as if the lover went up on the tree. The last line is about not knowing the man who loved him, which is unfortunate, but it is still vague as to who it is. It doesn’t make any comment about what happened on the tree, but it may be concluded that the lover has died because of how desperately the singer wants to be back with the lover. The lover has surrendered everything for the beloved, the singer. This complete surrender of self for the other is a natural extension of a true love. Love requires all of these things in this song: vulnerability, intimacy, surrender, giving. This song focuses on the surrender of love. It is possible to listen to this song and never figure out what exactly it is about, except knowing it is about love. It is not just the lyrics of the song that make it kenotic, but in the experience of listening to the song, the listener feels the rawness of what it means to surrender to someone else, or even to die for them.

Growing up listening to this song, the meaning of the last few lines was always unclear. When I thought of Christ as the lover, all of a sudden everything made sense. There are no longer random lines at the end of the song. The second half of the song recalls details from the Passion of Christ, such as His clothes being stripped away and giving His body to the lonely. The tree is an allusion to Christ hanging on the Cross. The man mentioned in the last line is Jesus Christ, who did the most loving thing possible and

died for the beloved's sake. This song becomes not just about any love story, but about a faith journey. The singer wants to surrender everything because Christ first surrendered Himself. Christ gave His life so that the singer could live and now the singer would give anything to be with Christ in return, yet he knows he cannot because there is nothing the singer could give up to have Christ there with them. This is the kind of openness Balthasar is talking about with Christ. It is that same surrender. The singer wants to be alone with Christ the way Christ wants to be alone with him. He has recognized Christ's love for him and longs to return the love, even though it is impossible. Sufjan has truly captured a lot of truth about the intimacy between Christ and humanity. He has captured how selfless Christ's death was and how truly loving it was. To surrender to God can only be good, but it is not always good to surrender to another.

The beauty of this song and the experience it creates can help us to talk about God. This song illustrates how love is vulnerable, gentle, humble, and requires surrender. These elements are also found in Christ. This kenotic love Sufjan describes in the song is the love of Christ. It is Christ who has done everything for humanity and the only thing that an individual believer can do in return is to try and draw close to Christ and return the love, even though that love can never be replicated because of how pure it is. Balthasar recognizes this kenotic relationship between the Father and the Son and illustrates in his theology how this relationship is reflected in Christ's relationship with the Church. Sufjan's song picks up on these themes of surrender and is a good artistic representation of what it means to surrender to a beloved. It is this sort of relationship the Church and Christ have with one another. Balthasar is correct in his emphasis that surrender is required by Christians in order to grow closer to God. It is this action that the Son models in his relationship with the Father. This opening up is

not easy to do, even to God who is good. Ultimately, the more we surrender to God's will, the more we can know God and become who God created us to be.

*Notes*

1. Sufjan Stevens, "To Be Alone With You," *Seven Swans* (Holland, MI: Asthmatic Kitty Records, 2004).
2. Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994), 30.
3. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2009), 456.
4. *Ibid.*, 457.
5. Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), 87.
6. *Ibid.*, 125.
7. *Ibid.*, 87.
8. Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 124.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 123.
11. *Ibid.*, 38.
12. Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 118.
13. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 556.
14. Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 98.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 461.
17. *Ibid.*, 556.
18. *Ibid.*, 542.
19. *Ibid.*